

**Submission
No 161**

**INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE
HOUSING**

Name: Mr Peter Butler

Date received: 28/02/2014

Submission to the NSW Parliamentary Inquiry into Social, Public and Affordable Housing

February 2014

Background: I have a background going back over thirty years working with disadvantaged communities – including in a youth refuge, a youth worker in Redfern, a family support worker in Campbelltown, and a community worker in public housing estates, through South West Tenants Association (SWRTA) and Macarthur housing coalition (MHC). Currently I am the Chair of Western Sydney Housing Coalition (WSHC), which has worked on the issue of affordable housing over several years, including holding forums with participation from community groups, government agencies, planners and researchers; and I'm on the housing team of Sydney Alliance – which includes community organizations, faith groups and unions – which is working on affordable housing as a major focus as a long-term strategy.

From this, I have an extensive and wide-ranging experience in housing and related issues, as a support worker, community volunteer and advocate, and a researcher and author, over many years and across many sectors. So this provides me with a good understanding of many aspects of housing – from its personal and community impacts, to the economic and social influences, the trends in housing provision and availability, and strategies used to address these issues. I am also aware of the submissions that others have made to this inquiry, and in some cases participated in their preparation.

Analysis of housing conditions

In this context, I want to make some preliminary observations. The first is regarding government responsibilities, strategies and impacts. Others have noted these factors and trends – for example, regarding public housing, how it has shifted over the last 50-odd years from providing housing for low-income workers, to shrinking to now focusing on the most needy cases, including the unemployed and aged, pensioners and those with mental illness and disabilities. All of this has significant local, regional and even national impacts – including conflict, stress, health problems, crime, education and employment failures – which affect not only local residents and surrounding communities, but also has economic costs for state governments in dealing with the consequences – higher crime rates, health needs, unemployment etc. Others have identified and explored these factors. But the point is, by allowing public housing to run down, by neglecting to provide adequate maintenance, amenities and support services, in the end this not only makes the living conditions of tenants more stressful and severe, in dealing with such problems, but it also costs the government a considerable amount in dealing with the flow-on effects. Other results include stress on services trying to meet these needs, and also declining living conditions, which further harms local communities. All this not only creates hardship for families and communities, but also for the children growing up in this environment. So, another generation is consigned to suffering the consequences of neglect. All of this is a waste of human and economic resources.

It is made worse by conflicts between the two sides of politics – this inquiry itself suffers from this, so its very effectiveness is limited. The white paper on revising the State's planning laws, which is critical for the effective implementation of any agreements reached through this inquiry, suffered and got bogged down for the same reason.

A major complicating factor is the lobbying from self-interested groups, which have turned housing into essentially a market for their own profit, rather than being an essential right and requirement for a decent life, in an advanced society like Australia supposedly is. These groups include developers, investors and landowners, who work together to protect their interests and determinedly lobby the government to maintain their dominance. But all this conspires to result in the consequences outlined above, which has reached a crisis point. Of course, in a democracy, everyone has the right to express and advocate for their position, but where this is distorted, democracy becomes unbalanced and dysfunctional.

This inquiry, if handled in a fair and transparent manner, has the potential to contribute to correcting this imbalance. So that is the purpose of my submission – to cut through such distortions, untangle conflicts and liberate people's lives and potential. So hopefully, members of the panel, from all sides of government, and the respective public servants, will share in this goal.

So now I will focus on housing itself – its supply, development, and regulation, strategies for improvement, and their benefits.

Sydney has been identified as the third most unaffordable city in the world, after Vancouver and Hong Kong. This in itself may seem surprising, especially the fact that we're worse off than such global cities as London and New York – why is this, and what are we doing wrong? There are two points to be made from this. One is that in Sydney we have allowed housing provision to become distorted, as noted above, by becoming primarily a market, and market-driven, which restricts access and provision for low-income groups.

The other is that there is a broader range of strategies available to correct this imbalance, which are used elsewhere, which Sydney would benefit from fostering. One of these, for example, is a range of social equity models – which other submissions have covered. To contextualize this, if we look at the range of affordable housing systems, it includes public housing (shrinking), community housing (growing slowly), a range of specialised or niche services like aged care complexes, emergency accommodation and boarding houses – and then there are the homeless, either sleeping rough or couch surfing. Many of these people rotate through other services – hospital, mental health units, or prison.

To address this seriously we need to put in place a well-designed and maintained housing framework, with a whole-of-government approach and with co-ordinated support systems, to create a pathway out of this crisis and the restrictions on people's lives. There are some good services available, and many caring, diligent staff working in them – but too often they are under-funded, unco-ordinated and erratic, emerging and disappearing almost at the whim of government funding, or political self-interest, in relation to media attention and public outcries. This does not build a sustainable system, and it allows for too many gaps in the system, which people trying to negotiate pathway towards a secure future, fall through.

This definitely applies to housing, - which is central, and crucial, to an individual's and a community's well-being. Inadequate or a lack of housing results in unnecessary stress and

barriers in a person's life – it makes it very difficult to find secure employment, for example, it affects health and emotional well-being and social isolation – all of which are costly, economically and in human terms, for the individual and society at large.

So that is why this inquiry is so crucial, and timely. It is an opportunity to identify the barriers and short-comings in the system – both the housing market and supply and access – and also the broader political, economic and social framework. We cannot afford to let it become just another political football. It is vital for the individuals and families concerned – but it is also a potentially game-changing opportunity to get housing right; not just for the rich and influential investors, but equally for the disadvantaged, struggling workers, and needy, who could be part of a better, dynamic, more caring and integrated Sydney and State – who are standing at the doorway of entering a major healthy and prosperous global city.

Peter Butler

Ph.